The Sojourner of Ash and Fire

By Jonathan Olvera

The work was harsh.

There were days when the sun sat too long in the sky, like a judgment refusing to pass. The desert didn't just burn—it branded. Every grain of sand carried heat, every breath carried thirst. The world, in its busyness and beauty, seemed to pass around this forgotten place—a small hell of the American Southwest, home to reptiles, wandering men, and beasts who had long since learned how to live without mercy.

I was born into this land, not by accident, but by inheritance.

There were laws here—unwritten but understood. Game and fairness were currency. A man's honor was judged by how he played both. We lived by what we were given and survived by what we could barter from the earth. In the local sphere of habitation, our identities were shaped by survival, our stories passed not in books, but in blood and memory.

I remember the difficulty well. Science, in this place, was no luxury—it was survival. The hard questions—where to find water, how to cultivate life in ash, how to trade knowledge for bread—were solved not in laboratories, but out in the open, beneath an unforgiving sky.

When the buffalo disappeared, others came—elephants from far lands, camels with eyes like ancient prophets. They were introduced not for wonder, but for necessity. We learned from them. We mimicked their endurance, their stillness, their ability to find water where none seemed to exist.

The world was changing, and so was the desert. Roads appeared—Roman in their design, winding and connecting the once-isolated communities. Governors came, too—men in suits and soldiers in boots. They didn't speak our tongue, but they tried to tame our dust. Their maps didn't always match the land, but they paved it anyway.

I lived among many in this strange new order, and we did our best to get along. We wrote. We learned. We taught one another how to make a life from nothing. In that process, I found purpose.

Most days, I walked beneath the boiling sky, searching for water. With blistered hands, I scraped at the earth's crust, hoping to find the cool promise buried beneath. One day, I did. I found a hidden pocket of water—small, precious, and real. That discovery lit something inside me. I began to plan. This resource had value. It had to be documented, shared, reported. Even in the wilderness, structure must follow discovery.

The law was Roman now. I understood that. I respected it.

And yet, in the silence of the desert, my past whispered to me.

I remembered Egypt—not the Egypt of maps, but the one of memory. I had served there once, in a past life perhaps. In Saudi Arabia, too. I was a servant to my family in Patrís and Capernaum, watching over children, attending to the needs of my uncle, a man of power and shame. He drank too much. His name was Herod. And those who followed him—the Pharisees—they wore their religion like a crown but used it as a whip.

Even then, I had escaped chains, not by strength, but by love. I found freedom in tending to others, in being useful, in not being cruel.

But when blood ran in the streets of Spanish Egypt, I fled.

I crossed land after land—Thess, Africa, Arabia—each more inhospitable than the last. And when I could run no more, I prayed. Not with words, but with my footsteps. And God answered. He sent Elijah—not a myth, but a presence. And in his chariot of fire, I crossed the sea, again and again. Sometimes to America. Sometimes back to the old lands.

In one such journey, I found my family again—in a jungle thick with vines and voices. The chariot found them, and I found peace, if only for a moment.

Now I am here once more, in the land of ash and fire. Arizona, they call it. A name born from wind and stone. The sky is no kinder here, but I am older now. Wiser. My story continues.

I write it so the children will remember. So the animals will know they were not forgotten. So the governors and the priests and the prophets might pause long enough to hear the truth that grows from this scorched soil.

That even in the harshest places, God walks with the sojourner.

The desert taught me many things. It taught me silence, and it taught me survival. But above all, it taught me to listen—not just with my ears, but with my spirit.

There were days when the wind whispered names I had long forgotten. Days when the rocks seemed to pulse with ancient rhythms, and I remembered the voices of those who walked this world before us—prophets, wanderers, servants, kings.

One night, as the sky wept ash and stars, I sat beside a shallow pit I had dug for water. The moon was pale and full, and the silence around me was deeper than usual, as if the desert itself were waiting. I had not spoken aloud in days. Yet, as I looked to the heavens, I said quietly, “Lord, I am here. Still. Listening.”

And I saw a flame—distant at first. Then it grew, not wild but purposeful. It did not consume the earth, but revealed it. A chariot approached, forged in fire, yet floating like a feather across the sand. Riding it was Elijah, his hair wind-swept, his eyes alive with memory and command.

He stepped down, and for a moment I was not in Arizona. I was in no land I could name—perhaps a place between heaven and earth, where time bowed its head and let the eternal pass through.

“Elijah,” I whispered, “I thought your work was finished.”

He smiled. “For some, the journey ends. For others, it begins again.”

I stood, unsure of my place. “Why me?”

“Because you remembered,” he said. “And because you ask questions when others seek comfort. You scratched at the ash when others surrendered to thirst.”

I followed him to the chariot. Inside, there was no fire, only warmth. It moved not with wheels, but with will. And suddenly, we were soaring above the desert, the land unrolling beneath us like an ancient scroll.

We passed over Egypt—golden and bloodstained. Over Arabia, where the wind carried prayers older than scripture. Over Spain, where the empire had risen and fallen again and again. Each place whispered my name, as if my soul had left echoes behind on every road I’d ever walked.

Then we descended—slowly, reverently—into a green so thick it swallowed sound. The jungle. Somewhere deep in Africa or the heart of memory. There, in the shadows of tall trees and tangled vines, I saw them—my family.

Not just those of flesh and blood, but those of spirit. The ones who had traveled through fire, who had crossed the sea with Moses, who had slept under stars with Abraham, who had danced before the LORD with David.

I wept, because I was known.

One child ran to me and placed a stone in my hand. It was warm and etched with symbols I did not recognize. “For the road back,” she said. “So you don’t forget.”

I turned to Elijah. “Why show me this?”

He looked to the sky, which had begun to turn gold at the edges. “Because you must go back, Jonathan. The desert still burns. But now, you burn too—with memory, with story, with truth. Go, and tell them.”

And just like that, the chariot returned me to the land of ash. The Arizona wind howled again. The fire was gone. But the warmth remained.

I returned to the work of water. But now I knew it wasn’t just about quenching thirst—it was about *remembering.* The desert was not empty. It was a library, if you knew where to read. Every grain of sand held history. Every lizard knew the wisdom of stillness. Every thorn had a scripture etched in silence.

I began to write again. Not just for myself, but for the others—those still searching for meaning in the dust.

Some came to me, asking why I dug where nothing seemed to grow.

I told them: “Because I believe something holy still waits beneath our suffering.”

Others laughed.

But a few stayed. They listened. They helped.

We built small shelters out of stone and patience. We carved names into the ground, not to mark graves, but to declare survival.

One day, I met a boy with skin the color of deep coffee and eyes like the sky before dawn. He sat beside my fire and said nothing. After a while, he held out a scroll—old, brittle, and written in a dialect I had never seen before.

“What is this?” I asked.

He pointed to the horizon. “It’s where we’re going.”

And I understood. This story was not finished.

Epilogue: A Word to the Reader

If you find yourself in a dry place, do not curse the dust. Sit with it. Listen to it. Dig deep, not just into the earth, but into yourself.

The fire you need may not fall from the sky.

It may already be inside you, waiting to rise.